

# Empty homes scandal of UK's billionaires row

**Exclusive** Mansions falling into ruin but owners make millions in property boom

Robert Booth

A third of the mansions on the most expensive stretch of London's "Billionaires Row" are standing empty, including several huge houses that have fallen into ruin after standing almost completely vacant for a quarter of a century.

A *Guardian* investigation has revealed there are an estimated £350m worth of vacant properties on the most prestigious stretch of The Bishops Avenue in north London, which last year was ranked as the second most expensive street in Britain.

One property owner, the developer Anil Värma, has complained that the address has become "one of the most expensive wastelands in the world". At least 120 bedrooms are empty in the vacant properties.

The empty buildings include a row of 10 mansions worth £73m which have stood largely unused since they were bought between 1989 and 1993, it is believed on behalf of members of the Saudi royal family.

Exclusive access to now derelict properties has revealed that their condition is so poor in some cases that water streams down ballroom walls, ferns grow out of floors strewn with rubble from collapsed ceilings, and pigeon and owl skeletons lie scattered across rotting carpets.

Yet, despite the properties falling into serious disrepair, it is likely that the Saudi owners of the portfolio made a significant profit from the £73m sale. The records available show that one of the mansions was worth only £1,125,000 in 1988.

The avenue, close to exclusive Highgate and Hampstead, is home to Richard Desmond, owner of Express Newspapers and Channel 5, members of the Saudi royal family, and Poju Zabludowicz, a billionaire art collector and philanthropist.

Homes are on the market for up to £65m but there are also 16 unoccupied man-

sions. More still are only used by their owners for short periods each year.

Most of the properties in the most expensive part of the avenue are registered to companies in tax havens including the British Virgin Islands, Curaçao, the Bahamas, Panama, and the Channel Islands, allowing international owners to avoid paying stamp duty on the purchase and to remain anonymous.

The revelations come at the same time as a growing political row over how empty properties can help solve a national housing shortage growing by more than 100,000 homes a year.

Boris Johnson has defied Downing Street to call for taxes to be cranked up on owners of vacant properties. He told City investors this month: "London homes aren't ... just blocks of bullion in the sky." He called for owners to live in their homes or rent them out. But the government has resisted attempts by councils, backed by the mayor, to multiply council tax rates on homes left empty for two years.

The proportion of empty properties on the most prestigious stretch of The Bishops Avenue is 10 times higher than for the rest of England, which has 710,000 empty homes.

"This illustrates everything that is wrong with the London housing market," said David Ireland, chief executive of the Homes from Empty Homes campaign group. "The high values are being used as an extreme investment vehicle at the expense of homes being homes."

"London's shortage of homes is so great that this feels immoral and dysfunctional. There are countless people in inadequate housing and here are homes on The Bishops Avenue that could be used."

Unoccupied properties include a man-

Nice lunch, M



François Hollande runs for David Cameron during yes

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